

**COREY HARRIS: Fulton Blues
Njumba 2012 (44:45)**

Crying Blues/ Underground/ J. Gilly Blues/ Black Woman Gates/
Tallahatchie/ Fulton Blues/ Devil Got My Woman/ House Negro Blues/
Black Rag/ Catfish Blues/ That Will Never Happen No More/ Lynch
Blues/ Maggie Walker Blues/ Fat Duck's Groove

Corey Harris has been at the forefront of those African-Americans who have sought not just to re-invigorate but to develop the blues tradition while remaining within it. His Alligator albums and especially 'Greens From The Garden' (1998) and 'Vü-Dü Menz' (2000) are a breath of fresh air. A previous album on his own Njumba label, 'Live At Starr Hill', carried the business on, after which Harris developed his pan-Africanist enthusiasms, producing albums heavy on various fusions, and smacking at times of mere musical tourism, especially after he began incorporating elements from reggae.



If this new self-produced album represents his current position, then he feels he has taken what he wants to take from his researches and fusions and has triumphantly returned to his original project. Three tracks are by Harris alone with his guitar. The accompanists heard elsewhere do not put a foot wrong. The resources available are a tight little blues band. Chris 'Peanut' Whitley, keyboards, from Harrisonburg, Virginia, has a track record in reggae and has worked with Harris since 2006, but has not imported any of the rhythmic quirks of reggae here. Drummer Ken Joseph is, as his moniker 'Trini Joe' implies, actually from Trinidad. Hook Herrera from San Jose has an eclectic curriculum vitae but here plays solid if sometimes derivative blues harp. Jayson Morgan plays both electric and acoustic bass.

Harris writes original songs about historical events which in the main give them a genuinely personal spin, but this is a risky business in a blues context. 'Tallahatchie', which deals with the murder of Emmett Till in August 1955, is somewhat strained both musically and textually, and it seems rather late to be protesting against the privileges enjoyed by 'house negroes', but this is a fine piece of music with inspired sax obligatos from Gordon 'Saxman' Jones. 'Maggie Walker Blues' deals with an African-American woman who became the first woman to head a bank in the United States. 'Well, Maggie Walker, lord knows you heaven sent, mama was a slave, you the bank president.' This is completely successful.

'Fulton Blues' memorialises a middle-class African-American neighbourhood in Richmond, Virginia, which has fallen victim to urban renewal. 'Lynch Blues', a song which appears also on 'Greens From The Garden', where it is related to a specific incident in family history, gets an intense performance, but is here more obviously not as good poetry as its relative 'Strange Fruit'. More directly personal is 'J. Gilly Blues', a memorial to Harris's late drummer Johnny Gilmore, who died in a fire at his home in Charlottesville, Virginia, on 22nd October 2009 at the age of 45. It is a heartfelt tribute to his late colleague: 'Gilly was a drummer, he cook a mean fishcake too.'

Of the reinventions of traditional material here, the reading of 'Devil Got My Woman' is particularly successful. Robert Petway's 'Catfish Blues' gets a more thorough makeover, which is truly exciting with wild wailing sax from Jones. Harris contributes particularly effective guitar soloing in a band context here. 'That Will Never Happen No More' is more historically oriented in style. 'Underground' proves that Harris can write convincing new material in an essentially traditional vein. 'Brother don't let dark catch you here, devil is out tonight.' So does 'Black Rag', a virtuoso performance on the banjo with appropriately squirming alto sax. Harris has immersed himself in the tradition and can reinvent and develop it with a sure touch.

This will not appeal to those who reject the whole idea of blues played by anthropology graduates and it could be argued at times that although the forms are blues and the rhythms African-American, some of the aesthetic comes from other areas of African-diaspora music. The insert transcribes all lyrics, without any contextualisation, and reveals that the artist is at war with capital letters. This has no musical relevance. Still recommended to those who prefer to buy tomorrow's collectors' items while they are in catalogue.

Howard Rye